TL 5190

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary
(The Roosevelt Room)

For Immediate Release

Thursday, September 16, 1999

President's Statement on Texas Tragedy and East Timor

1:40 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Before I depart for the FEMA Operations Center, I'd like to say just a few words about East Timor and the terrible murders in Texas last night.

First, I'm pleased that the U.N. Security Council has approved the creation of a multi-national force to be led by Australia, to deploy as soon as possible to end violence, restore order and support the results of the August 30 referendum, where the people of East Timor voted overwhelmingly for independence.

After consulting closely with Congress and with the government of Australia on the best way for the United States to support this operation, and on the recommendation of Secretary Cohen and my national security team, I have decided to contribute to the force in a limited, but essential, way -- including communications and logistical aid, intelligence, air lifts of personnel and material and coordination of the humanitarian response to the tragedy

We will deploy about 200 people, about half of whom will serve on the ground in East Timor. In addition, elements of the Pacific Fleet will provide support. I am especially encouraged that Asian nations will be taking the primary responsibility. The overall force will contain about 7,500 people, roughly half will be Australian; and I understand that Thailand and many other Asian nations will contribute, as well as governments from outside the region.

This mission is in America's interests for several reasons. Indonesia's future is important to us, not only because of its resources and its sea lanes, but for its potential as a leader in the region and the world. It is the fourth most populous nation in the world; the largest Muslim nation in the world. All Asians and Americans have an interest in a stable, democratic, prosperous Indonesia.

Our fundamental values are also at stake in East Timor. The election on August 30th was conducted fairly, under the leadership of the U.N., with the agreement of the Indonesian government. It produced a clear mandate for independence. The violence since is abhorrent to all of us who care about human dignity and democracy.

Of course, on any mission like this, there are dangers and risks of casualties. There remains a great deal of work ahead; but this force is well equipped for the job, and it is a job that is in the interests of peace and stability

Last night, in the Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, during a prayer service for teenagers, a gunman killed seven worshippers, wounded seven others and killed himself. Yet, again, we have seen a sanctuary violated by gun violence, taking children brimming with faith and promise and hope before their time. Our nation's support and prayers are with the families of the victims, those still suffering in the hospital, and the entire Fort Worth community

Federal law enforcement officials are now working with state officials and local authorities to find all the answers. But we know we have to redouble our efforts to protect our children. We know we have to act as if it were our own children being targeted by gun violence

We know that there is nothing we can do to assure that this will never happen, but there is a lot more we can do to assure that it will happen more rarely. And I can only hope that the shock of this event will spur that kind of action.

Thank you very much.

Q Mr. President, did you consult the leaders? You say you consulted the leaders on the force, this very small force?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. Yes.

Q Mr. President, on executive privilege, now that you've asserted that, would you voluntarily release documents?

END 1:47 P.M. EDT

To comment on this service,
send feedback to the Web Development Team.

Read our Privacy Policy